

**Statement of U.S. Senator Ken Salazar
Regarding the Voting Rights Act Reauthorization
July 20, 2006**

Mr. President, let me at the outset of this historic day in the United States Senate give my accolades to Senator Specter and to Senator Leahy for their leadership in the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act.

I think this one of the finest days of the United States Senate of the 109th Congress because it is demonstration of Republicans and Democrats coming together to deal with a very important question of our nation.

I congratulate the Judiciary Committee and all of those who have created a template for how we should do business here in the United States Senate. I rise today to offer my unequivocal support for the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott, and say Cesar Chavez Voting Rights Act.

I stood on the Senate floor to pay tribute to the Voting Rights Act on the occasion of its 40th Anniversary.

In my remarks on that day, I urged my colleagues to rise above the partisanship that often plagues this body and renew the promise of the landmark civil rights legislation by reauthorizing the key provisions that were set to expire in 2007.

I am extremely pleased that the Senate today is poised to take action on this important reauthorization measure.

Without enforcement and accountability of our Nation's voting laws for ALL Americans, the words of the Declaration of Independence, declaring "All men are created equal", the words written in the Constitution guaranteeing the inalienable right to vote, and the maxim of one person – one vote, those principles enshrined in our elected laws, are little more than empty words.

The reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act is fundamental to protect these rights and values and to ensure that they translate to actual practice, actual representation, and an actual electoral voice for every American.

I want to especially thank Senator Leahy for introducing an amendment on my behalf in Committee that incorporated the name of César E. Chávez, a true American hero, into the title of the Senate's reauthorization bill.

Like the venerable American leaders who are now associated with this effort, César Chávez fought for all Americans to be included in our great democracy. It is only fitting that his name be a part of the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act.

I believe incorporating the names of these historic American leaders underscores the importance of reflecting on the history of our country

and our never-ending, not yet completed, quest to become a more inclusive America.

A MORE INCLUSIVE AMERICA

When one looks back at our history, one learns some very painful lessons from that past.

We must keep in mind that we, as a nation, for the first 250 years of our history, allowed one group of people to own another group of people under a system of slavery simply based on the color of their skin.

It took the bloodiest war of our country's history, even more bloody than World War II – the Civil War – where over half a million people were killed on our own soil, to bring about an end to the system of slavery and to usher in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments of our Constitution.

These three amendments are the bedrock of the proposition that all Constitutional liberties are endowed upon all Americans without exception. But it took many long years for the promise of these amendments to be realized here in our own nation.

Notwithstanding the tremendous loss of blood and life during the Civil War, some years later in 1896, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, our United States Supreme Court sanctioned a system of segregation.

The Court's decision to uphold an 1890 Louisiana statute mandating racially segregated but equal railroad carriages ushered in another dark period in our country's history where "Jim Crow" was the law of the land throughout the South.

Similar laws applied to other groups. Throughout the Southwest, Mexican Americans were systematically denied access to "White Only" restrooms and other places of public accommodation. Just as there were

signs that said “No Blacks Allowed” in the South, there were also signs that read “No Mexicans Allowed.”

In the now infamous *Plessy* case, Justice Harlan, writing for the dissent looking ahead to the century to come, made the following observation. Justice Harlan said, and I quote:

The destinies of the races, in this country, are indissolubly linked together and the interests of both require that the common government law shall not permit the seeds of race hate to be planted under the sanction of law.

Justice Harlan’s statement was profound in its forecast for America. It is unfortunate that his words of warning were largely ignored for the next half century.

It was not until 1920, for example, that our Constitution even guaranteed women the right to vote.

And it was not until 1954, that the Supreme Court, under the very able leadership of Chief Justice Warren, struck down the “separate but equal” doctrine as unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment in the *Brown v. Board of Education*. That case was argued by Thurgood Marshall, another American hero who gave his life for equal opportunity for all Americans.

More hard-won change followed that 1954 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.

While the Fifteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1870, guaranteed all citizens the right to vote regardless of race, in 1965, only a very small percentage of African Americans was registered to vote in states like Mississippi and Alabama. In Mississippi, in that year, only 6.7% of Africans Americans were registered to vote. And in Alabama, less than 20% were registered to vote.

The various tactics that were used to impede people from casting their vote, their right in our democracy, ranged from literacy tests, poll taxes, and language barriers, to overt voter intimidation and harassment.

On August 6, 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, America took a critical step forward in fulfilling our Constitution's ideas.

Just a year earlier, President Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, proclaiming that in America, as he said:

We believe that all men are created equal, yet many are denied equal treatment. We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights, yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights. We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty, yet millions are being deprived of those blessings, not because of their own failures, but because of color of the skin.

President Johnson knew then what we still recognize today.

The enactment of both of these critical pieces of legislation in the 1960's was another step forward in our country's journey to become an inclusive America where all its citizens enjoy the rights and protections guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

When he recalled the day when the Voting Rights Act was signed by President Johnson, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wisely pointed out that ``the bill that lay on the polished mahogany desk was born in violence in Selma, AL, where a stubborn sheriff had stumbled against the future."

Dr. King was, of course, referring to ``Bloody Sunday," Selma incident, which took place on March 7, 1965, where more than 500 non-violent civil rights marchers attempting a 54-mile march to the state capital to

call for voting rights were confronted by an aggressive assault by authorities.

In response to the violence in Selma and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was shot three weeks earlier by a state trooper during a civil rights demonstration, President Johnson addressed Congress and the nation on March 15, 1965 to press for the passage of voting rights legislation. Indeed, President Johnson's speech served as a rallying call to the nation and to Congress, he said:

At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox (ahh – pah – MAH—tux). So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.

This time, on this issue, there must be no delay, no hesitation and no compromise with our purpose. We cannot, we must not, refuse

to protect the right of every American to vote in every election that he may desire to participate in.

Five months after the Selma march, on August 7, 1965, President Johnson signed into law the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* into law.

In our country's history, we have stumbled, but great leaders such as Dr. King – and those whose names are associated with this reauthorization: Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and César Chávez – those are people who gave their lives to make certain that when we stumble, we get back up and we continue on path of America forward. We continue an American in progress.

Since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the doors to opportunity for political participation by previously disenfranchised groups have swung open. Their voices are now heard and counted across America.

This progress is evident throughout the nation in all levels of government.

The number of black elected officials nationwide has risen from 300 – only 300 – in 1964 to more than 9,000 today. In addition, there are over 5,000 Latinos who now hold public office, and there are still hundreds more Asian Americans and Native Americans serving as elected officials.

Conclusion

So it is with history in mind – and with the increasing diversity of our country – that I look to the future of an inclusive America continuing to fulfill the promise and guarantees to all Americans that our Constitution provides.

Mr. President, our work is not yet done. Although significant advances to ensure equal voting rights for all Americans have been made, the testimony presented before the Senate Judiciary Committees point to an unfortunate truth: Americans are still all too often being kept from the polls.

The greatness of this country depends on our learning and not forgetting the painful lessons of our past, including poll taxes and literacy tests that prevented countless individuals from exercising their right to vote.

I believe the federal government must remain vigilant in its safeguarding this sacred right to vote.

I believe that this legislation we are considering today is a manifestation of the U.S. Congress' vigilance. It represents the U.S. Senate working at its best.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.